

July 25, 2010

IN YOUR FACE

Scriptures

Hosea 1:2-10

Genesis 18:20-32

Colossians 2:6-15

In 1992 I went with the May Term Class to Russia. We flew to Helsinki and then took the train to St Petersburg. We were there right after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and there was economic chaos. Stores were empty and people lined up in the streets outside subway stations and bus stations, a double line holding out small items they were trying to sell to get some money for food or fuel. A pair of shoes here, a coat there, a bag of candy, whatever they thought they could sell for some currency.

We ate breakfast and dinner at the Astoria and several young women were assigned by the hotel to wait on us. Lots of beets and cucumbers for supper as well as breakfast in all sorts of forms. The second morning one of my students leaned over to me to tell me he saw one of our waitresses had returned later in the evening, dressed differently than when she served us and waited by the entrance to the hotel

meeting men and going off with them. I realized that she was prostituting herself out at night at the same hotel she waitressed in during the day.

I thought yeah that's right times are tough and she obviously needed to earn money. Only later did I also realize that she must have done that with the blessing of the hotel management, or maybe the hotel management hired her for both jobs or.....

I had never met a prostitute before and now here she was serving me more beers.

And here is Hosea a prophet of the Northern Kingdom of Israel about 750-721 BCE. One of the minor prophets. You know – Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

It was a prosperous time for Israel. The people were drawn to worship Yahweh along with the local fertility gods including Ba'al. Religious syncretism was the order of the day. It was easier, convenient, and beside this way they covered all their bases, offending no one. A time not unlike our own.

Hosea, or God speaking through Hosea, decides the people just don't get it. Loyalty to God is not to be divided. Monotheism just wasn't catching on.

I think of ancient Israel as a relatively small state with a population estimated at between 350,000 and 500,000 or a bit larger than the population of Des Moines. I don't know for sure but I think everybody in the Northern Kingdom would have known about Hosea. We know all the movers and shakers in Des Moines, at least

by name. We would recognize them on the street or on the evening news. So would the people of Israel, if that had had the evening news.

So when Hosea marries Gomer people notice. And they scratch their head. What is he doing. A prophet of God marrying a whore, or perhaps as some suggest, a temple prostitute, maybe in the temple of one of the fertility gods even. Well he is trying to get across a prophetic message which the people have been ignoring for a long time. There is one God, Yahweh. Yahweh would tolerate no other gods.

Hosea is not the first prophet to come along with this message. The acceptance of the idea of one god was a new idea for humans and the kept slipping back into polytheism, which we continue to do to this day.

He has got to get in their face about this multiple god issue.

So Hosea chooses a stronger, unmistakable metaphor by marrying Gomer . To our modern ears it is a very unfortunate choice. It is offensive to our ears. Whoredom is not something we talk about in polite company.

Jan Everhart's advice: "Whatever you do with Hosea and Gomer I hope you let people think about how problematic the image is -- comparing Israel to a whoring female is so prominent in the prophets and has been very abused by many interpreters. Too bad "Hosea" and the others couldn't find a more helpful image."

And what about poor Gomer? Like the prostitute I met in St Petersburg I do not judge her but wonder how did she get where she was and what does she think about

all this. It is possible that given the low status of prostitutes in that society perhaps marriage to Hosea was a step up for Gomer. Did she agree with this scheme. Or was she duped into participating, just another kind of prostituting herself.

And then she had to endure having three kids named poorly, to say the least.

The first child, a son, was named Jezreel, after the valley of bloodshed where Naboth was killed by King Ahab so he could get Naboth's vineyard, where Jezebel herself was killed, and Canaanite devotes were slaughtered. Jezreel is a very fertile flat plain where armies for millennia fought, where Gideon managed to defeat the Midianites and Amalikites. Jezreel and the nearby mountain of Meggido had become bywords for violence and torture and could even be understood as referring to the judgement of God. Hebrew for Meggido is har Meggido anglicized to Armageddon.

And the second child, a daughter, was named Lo-ruhamah, "not Pitied" which signified the end of God's compassion for his people. And finally Lo-ammi, the second son, meaning not my people, the disowning by God of God's chosen people.

Yikes, can you imagine the introductions.

I understand the message. I, like Jan, am discomforted by the metaphor. I know others share my discomfort. Was this metaphor chosen because in Hosea's world women were so devalued that their situation could/should be exploited for a prophetic word from God. What kind of a god is it that would use women this way

to make some point. Or is it not God's fault that such a metaphor was chosen and Hosea was just a typical 8th century BCE chauvinist.

Probably there is some truth and understanding to be found in all of the above. But still something nags at me from this story that suggests we ought not to explain away the discomfort. I have been trying to live with the discomfort of this passage for more than a month now, to let the discomfort speak to me.

A few weeks ago Pat Singer suggested I should read a book by Nicholas Kristof and his wife Shery WuDunn called *Half the Sky*. The title comes from the ancient Chinese proverb "Women hold up half the sky". I always read what Pat suggests. Both authors have won a Pulitzer Prize. And together they write about the world wide plight of women. It is a book I wanted to put down and forget about but which I could not put down, it was hard to read and compelling at the same time. I think we should read it as a church and then meet to decide where we go from here.

Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize winning economist, has calculated from population studies that worldwide more than 100 million women are missing. In most regions of the world there are more women than men. This makes sense because women tend to live longer than men. But in countries where women have a deeply unequal status there are more men than women. China has 107 females to 100 males, India, 108, Pakistan 111. Other studies come up with similar figures. About 2 million girls disappear each year.

In the US or Europe, discrimination is usually about unequal pay, or harassment involving touching, or underfunded women's sport teams. In much of the rest of the world the discrimination is lethal. Some of that is neglect, boys are much more important than girls and therefore get medical attention earlier and more often. Some is deliberate such as honor killings in India. In India a bride burning, for an inadequate dowry or simply to eliminate her so the man can remarry happens every two hours. Sex trafficking in some countries involves the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of girls and women each year. They are used when young and pretty and then killed and nobody notices

Are you getting uncomfortable yet?

Maybe Gomer is one of the women this book talks about.

There is another important part to this story which comes from the other half of this book. The sub title of this book is "Turning Oppression into opportunity for Women Worldwide". Oppression everywhere brings the possibility for opportunity.

Throughout *Half the Sky* are stories of women who had the courage and the strength to stand up for themselves and other women and children and they catalyzed change that made a real difference. A woman in Pakistan was sentenced to be gang raped by a court dominated by higher caste members for a rape her brother was wrongly accused of because she spoke up in his defense. Women who

are abused in that way most often commit suicide to not shame the family, but she found the courage to report the abuse to the police. She was awarded \$8300 by president Musharif and she promptly used it to found a girls' school in her community because she knew that education would lead to change. When she continued to speak out on behalf of women Musharif got mad at her, accusing her of shaming the nation, and released her rapists from prison and refused to let her leave the country. Her courage is having a positive effect. Rapes incidents are down and even some men are speaking up on her behalf. And Musharif is out of power.

Tears over Time Magazine

Every seedy part. God's Kingdom is brought about by use of every part of our lives and experience including every seedy part parts we are discomforted by. It is all part of the plan. Even Gomer had an important part to play. Even our discomfort with Hosea's offensive metaphor plays apart. The kingdom of God is not some romantic comedy, Hollywood style. It is messy, awkward, transforming, joyous, surprising and really funny at times.

Let me finish the story in Hosea not included in the lectionary readings. Read on in Hosea 1:10-11 and 2:19-23.

Amen

Prayer

Transforming Mystery

Eternal creator,
transforming mystery,
spirit of wisdom,
we speak our praise and gratitude
for your release of life
within us and in our universe.
Your spirit uncovers truths that
we have kept hidden
and supports us in tasks we fear to undertake
alone.

We praise you for
invitations to growth, intimacy,
and depth of life,
for companionship and comfort
extended to us in our journey to be faithful
to our callings and to you.

Receive our thanksgiving,
gentle one,
for you have touched our soul.
You have loved us from the moment of our first waking
and known us in joy and in grief.

Help us claim our strength and need,
our awesomeness and fragile beauty,
that encouraged by your truth
we might work to restore compassion in the human family
and renew the face of the earth.

Spirit of the living Christ,
invade the depth of our being
with your spirit of forgiveness and healing,
that we may be daring in our gospel deeds
and may pursue your dreams of
justice.

Be near to us now as we pray together our concerns and our joys.

Benediction

This magnificent, flawed world is waiting for us, inviting us to see with open eyes.

Go with the hope and promise

of God's sustaining love.

This service is ended

Go in Peace